

continually did, she answered with the pretty compliance of a daughter.

Henrietta urged the necessity of two more sleeping-porches, and a difficulty was solved there by Osborne's suggesting that the tower might be modernized to serve for one of these. In the end, Humphry having maintained that all final decision must be with Elsie, Osborne was asked to draw some plans, that they might call again for her to see them and decide.

But Elsie made her appearance alone, early one morning, at his studio door.

"I slipped away without the others," she told him naively. "Hallie—you see, she's always been used to deciding things for me—and he's so much older—I can't think when they're both here thinking."

UP before the big drawing-board where the plans lay spread, Osborne pulled a chair and put her in it, studying her the while. An adorable creature, a bit of tender, delicate, vivid flesh and blood, informed with a mysterious, fugitive, child-woman spirit—a little young Eve. He was aware of a difference; yes, there was a change—even in these few days since she was there. Her eyes—those soft, long-lashed, child's eyes—were over-bright, and her hands moved continually.

"Are you interested in architecture—in a general way?" he asked, as he picked up his dividers to point out the features of his sketched plans.

"Oh, yes," Elsie turned to him with a sort of relief. "I wanted to look at these pictures of houses you have—and the floor-plans. Might we—for a little while—before we bother with this other?"

Osborne, who had work on hand, and would very promptly have told any one else so, made answer to this artless proposition by smilingly bringing out a pile of old specifications and elevations. Bungalows, cottages, suburban homes, country places, he spread them forth tirelessly for Elsie through a long, happy hour, during which it chanced that no one came to disturb them.

At first the man just sat and watched her. He hunted out special designs, to enjoy her innocent abandonment of delight in them. He played with her as we play with a charming child, furnishing the toys and make-believe that keep it going. But Elsie was no longer a charming child. So contagious was her mood that when, at the end of an hour, she caught sight of her wrist-watch—the latest gift from Humphry—and jumped to her feet with a little cry, Osborne waked with her from the illusion—came back a million miles from fairyland, where "once upon a time" makes the most unlikely things true.

"Oh, I must go!" she exclaimed. "I've got luncheon to get for Hallie and Dane. Here I've wasted your whole morning—and we haven't looked at the porch plans."

"Come and waste to-morrow morning," Osborne invited. "That house is sound enough architecture of its type. We want these necessary changes and additions of ours to be in harmony—along the original lines—whether we'd choose to build that way now or not. In these questions of architecture, it takes a good while to know whether or not you're suited. You've got to live with the proposition for a time—hold it in your mind."

Midway her quick dive for the door, Elsie checked; she spoke in a curiously diminished voice:

"Yes; and don't you think that's so about a good many things?"

Bob Osborne had no knowledge of the suddenness of her engagement, yet he answered lightly:

"Well—you women don't need it as much—you've always got the privilege of changing your mind. The trouble with the lath and plaster and brick and stone of a house is that it costs to change them, once you've got 'em built. Come to-morrow—or any time that suits you—and we'll have it out with those sketches of mine."

As Elsie walked home under the sparkling November sunshine of California, her absent glance encountered the wrist-watch, and her cheeks went fiery at the recollection of its presentation. A

season of patient serving had given Humphry confidence. To-day Elsie, out there in the sunny street, glanced from side to side as if she wanted to escape from something. She hadn't dreamed it would be like that. She cringed at the searing, blinding memory of his embrace, of his demand that she kiss him—and of what happened after. She had cried—oh, yes, she had forgotten that some one in the next room might hear her; she had forgotten everything, and had been noisy and violent—and Humphry was frightened. It ended peaceably, with the girl soothed, diverted, the little watch brought out and made much of. But terror was alive in her now as she looked forward to other evenings, other gifts.

After a while all her evenings were to be spent with Humphry; he would give her everything. *He would give her everything.* That had been one of the main arguments for the marriage. When she first said her yes, and for several of the days that followed, she had felt almost ashamed of the bargain, because it seemed to her that she was making no return. Now an abyss yawned before her feet, a chasm which all the response expected of her could never fill!

That which her brother Dana had counted on to defend her from the match came too late. Humphry's kiss had roused her cruelly, monstrously. He was not the prince.

AT this time she was out continually with Humphry and Henrietta, buying things, dining at restaurants, attending the theater. They went in taxis. It was her first real experience of life in big, lighted, bedecked, music-filled spaces where people gathered for pleasure.

The girl felt herself traveling swiftly in a mysterious direction, toward a goal the thought of which was terror. She only knew that she wanted help—help that she could not ask from Dana or Henrietta. When she would have done so, the words

refused to come. It was to strangers, people she scarcely knew, that she longed to cry out. And this passionate, instant, strangled demand for help deepened her girlish tones, loosed a vibration in them that no man could listen to unmoved. The glances that met her took fire from hers; heads turned to look after her. If there was a little dance in the school set, she had half a dozen proffers of escort; other girls' sweethearts broke from their allegiance and made love to her; the come-hither was lit in Elsie's eyes.

THAT first visit to the architect, with its clandestine flavor, made others easy. The plans were decided upon, the work put in hand, Osborne supervising, and Elsie spent some portion of each day with him. If it was up at the angelic house, the workmen about and Henrietta or Humphry present, she made no move in his direction. When she came to his studio, and there were other people there; as sometimes happened, she barely looked in and went on. It was when she found him alone that she stayed. At first they talked house plans,—the house in which she was to live with Humphry,—and their color came and went, their eyes sought each other's and shifted away from the encounter.

Later came those generalities which are so intensely personal. Finally and inevitably, the personalities themselves walked into the conversation, thinly concealed, wearing a pronoun for mask, pulling "Some people think" or "they say" around them as a flimsy disguise.

If Elsie was a lure, a witches'-fire, to other men, who were in her eyes but as trees walking, when her driven, homeless fancies began to focus about Bob Osborne she became to him an irresistible invitation and a torment. She sought him as inevitably as the hungry child hunts for food. She was alternately moved by her instinct toward him and withheld by memory of Henrietta's state-

ment that he was engaged to a girl in the East.

Osborne, a normal young fellow, strongly based, well supplied with good cold reason, and not wanting a touch of the stoic, had in his heart bidden the question of The Woman wait upon the establishment of a career. But he was caught beyond rescue in the whirling circle of Elsie's emotional storm and drawn in to its very center. He knew, at his sanest, that he didn't want a girl, however desperately he might be in love with her, who was marrying an old man for his money—and ready for a romance on the side.

Was Elsie that? In those snatched interviews of theirs she seemed always about to make some revelation—some appeal; yet, if he made the shadow of a response, she only gazed at him dumbly, or made haste to run away. It began to tell on Osborne's nerves. He took to smoking too much and sitting in the twilight—a practice fit only for the very happy or the very unhappy.

AT the Humphry house nothing remained but a final word in the matter of some decorations. They were all to come to the studio after dinner for this last conference. Osborne dined early and hurried back to make ready for them. Alone in the place where she had hunted him out to bewilder and tantalize him, he forgot his preparations, and went blundering up and down in the big room through the blind man's holiday. A sense of futility and helplessness made him bitter. Dane Crosby—and brilliant Henrietta, whom he had once so much admired—what were they about to let this child make ugly wreck of her life?

A choking tenderness, sheer longing, bade fair to blot out all argument. It was raining—rain at twilight, nature's ultimate pathos. A fire of manzanita roots smoldered sluggishly on the hearth. He got his answer pat. It came softly along the hallway on swift, nervous feet that

stumbled, and pushed aside the

portières with cold, wet fingers.

"Bob," a very frightened voice

quavered, "where are you?" And

Elsie peered in.

"Oh—it's you," Osborne said hoarsely, backing away, switching on the lights with a hand that shook. Then, in a louder, a more formal tone: "I was just thinking about you."

His glance went past her, searching for Humphry and the others. Black and empty the archway yawned behind her. Against its shadow her little pale face showed startlingly, the rain-drops on it like tears. She was breathing hard and trembling all over, as she stood there in his door, looking at him dumbly.

"Elsie—what is it?" he whispered.

Her lips moved, but at first no sound came. Then she began in little foolish, broken sentences, watching his face:

"I—I came away while the were at dinner—I hadn't any umbrella—I forgot my rubbers."

"Oh." Two long strides brought him across the room. He drew her in to a chair beside his heart and knelt to mend the fire.

"They're ruined," she said inconsequently, and poked out toward the blaze her white kid slippers, soaked, muddy, one of them burst. "Dana got them for me when I graduated." She glanced almost furtively about the room, seeming in an agony of embarrassment. "He went without smoking for two weeks to buy them—poor Dane!"

Osborne rose from his fire-making, and stood looking down at her, desperately perplexed. When she threw back the Red Riding Hood cape that wrapped her, he saw that the front of the childish white muslin frock



"I had to come to you—there was nobody else. I can't marry him! It was these words that stopped the man at the door."